Scull have narrated the origins and described the character of asylums and mental hospitals. Most of their studies have been influenced by Michel Foucault's Madness and Civilization: A History of Madness in the Age of Reason, with its idea of the "great confinement," and its systematic debunking of the "Whiggish" or naively "progressive" view of such history. The most significant of these historians, Andrew Scull, has refined and qualified his earlier Foucauldianism (arguing that the idea of the "great confinement" is itself a myth, or a development peculiar to French history), but has retained and more clearly articulated his connection of the rise of the asylum in England to the development of a market economy. He remains an eloquent critic of psychiatric "professionalism."

The following parallels these earlier histories, as in some ways it must, as a study of texts focused on an institution subject to the same economic and social forces as any other in a developing capitalist society. But it is also intended to elaborate another issue initially raised by Foucault, the absolute separation of reason and non-reason which he argues characterizes attitudes to madness in the "Age of Reason," and marks its "constitution as a mental illness" (x). The texts that form the basis of this study, because of the common affiliation of their medical authors, together comprise a peculiarly intense "monologue of reason about madness" (x-xi) which helps us to understand some of the effects on discourse of its separation from its ostensible subject. The peculiar character of these texts owes much to their being "monologues," an effect on the sane of their silencing of the mad.[v] Despite (or because of) their monologic character, these texts are also curiously lopsided, self-incriminatingly polyvalent, and embarrassingly lacunar. At the risk of further one-sidedness, I confess that I sometimes read in them the "mirror writing" of the "silenced" mad, an effect on the sane of their silencing of themselves.